



## The role of place identity in the preservation of Iranian historical sites: A comparative study of Jolfa and Masjid Jame districts, Isfahan

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### Abstract

Urban places may be perceived as the collective imprints of their inhabitants' personal participation in the mental and emotional moulding of their place identity and place-attachment. In historical texts (sites) this construction process of place-attachment is even more intense due to the conglomeration of historical and collective memories as well as its pertinence to the question of national identity. Yet, because the locals' sense of a place is necessarily unique to the particular place they might be more sensitive, appreciative and protective of it.

This paper examines whether and to what extent the locals' sense of place, place-attachment, and place-identity play a crucial role in the conservation and preservation of historical texts in their cities. For the purpose of comparison two historical sites with different physical situations of the Isfahan city, namely, the Jolfa and the Masjid Jame districts, were selected for study through field observations and questionnaire surveys of 200 randomly selected respondents. The findings revealed that although there were significant positive relationships between place identity and the conservation and preservation of historical sites, several other factors did influence the preservation process. These ranged from aesthetic and ownership considerations to economic situations and management issues.

**Keywords:** collective memories, historical sites, Isfahan, place-attachment, place-identity, sense of place

### Introduction

The conservation and preservation of urban historical texts (sites) in many developing countries is crucial not only because the sites are often in dire physical states due to poor maintenance and mismanagement. Their relative incompatibility with today's needs, and changes in people tastes and way of living may lead to the neglect of these valuable parts of cities. There are some historical sites which can no longer satisfy contemporary needs, costs too much to maintain, and thus devalued and deserted by their original residents in favour of other better places. These sites were then occupied by those who had no other better places to live in.

Conservation is a sensible practice and a cultural construct. People naturally conserve something which is practically useful such as food or money or buildings; but people do not necessarily conserve what is or may be culturally valuable. One reason for this is that people do not always – perhaps not often – fully realize the parameters and attributes of their own culture to fully appreciate the uniqueness of their historical sites. Another reason is that economic imperatives often make people more focused on current issues and the immediate future than on matters that require in-depth reflections and long term perspectives (Hoyle, 2001: 302).

Be that as it may, human motivations can still be harnessed in the making of a sustainable city, in conserving and preserving sites of historical and cultural importance to the city. One way to do this is to appeal to the relationship of the self or the human ego with the place. This relationship constructs the

human identity and his attachment to places and things, and can be a great motivation for many site conservation and preservation activities.

This paper examines whether and to what extent the locals' sense of place, place-attachment, and place-identity play a crucial role in the conservation and preservation of historical texts in the Jolfa and the Masjid Jame districts of the historic city of Isfahan.

### **Sense of self, place-identity and place-attachment**

Development of the 'sense of self' is a matter of first learning to distinguish oneself from others by visual, auditory, and other perceptual means. A child when first learning to identify himself recognizes that there are some things referring to objects or people that are not himself. The child does not recognize these things as something other than his self, but by the relationship each one has with his self. The statement of "that is a mommy" differs the child from "a mommy", and when he refers to a person as "my mommy", he not only recognizes her as another person but also describes himself by means of his relationship to an identifiable person, objects, things, spaces and places. In other words he identifies himself by means which satisfy and support his needs and existence (Proshansky et al., 1983: 57).

Self identity forms in many aspects of our normal life such as our daily roles (e.g. mother, teacher, Colonel, son), the groups to which we belong (political, social, cultural), our wearing (trendy clothes, perfume, hair style), things we purchase (fast, sexy and expensive automobiles, nice homes in high status areas, books, art, landscaping), places which we frequent, remember or imagine (home town, historic church, commercial district, wilderness area) and so on (Belk, 1988; Sack, 1988, cited in: Hull IV et al., 1994: 109).

Sense of self is not static. It is characterized by growth and change in dealing with and response to changes in the physical and social worlds (Proshansky et al., 1983: 59). Changing place and relocation can provide opportunities for self-development but an important issue is the degree of control that people have over the nature and rate of change of place (Gu et al., 2008: 640).

Place-identity is a sub-structure of the self-identity of people in contact with the physical world in which they live. The contact leads to cognition of place which represents memories, ideas, feelings, attitudes, values, preferences, meanings, and conceptions of behavior and experience which relate to complexity and variety of physical settings (Proshansky et al., 1983: 59).

Place-identity refers to the mixture of feeling about specific physical settings (Proshansky, Fabian & Kaminoff, 1983, cited in: Brown et al., 2007: 90) including how they provide meaning and purpose to life (Giuliani & Feldman, 1993; Shamai, 1991; Williams & Roggenbuck, 1989, cited in: Ibid: 59). Krupat (1983) claims that place-identity has a key role in relationship of a person with his environment in that not only is it a base of activity and behavior forms but that it also participates as a part of the individual in his "ego" meaning (Mehdizadeh et al., 2010: 38). Place identity makes life more vivid and meaningful because it reinforces other aspects of identity (Ford, 1999: 255).

A historic urban core includes a mix of assets that provides a variety of possibilities (buildings, streets, squares and people) for defining and founding its identity. In traditional urban environments urban cores depict the most successful qualities of a well-defined urban text, namely architectural unity, order and visual continuity (Doralti et al., 2004: 331). While the purpose of preservation is to maintain a historical legacy to be safely handed to future generations as a hereditary identity feature, 'development' aims to profit from the use of a community and its environment (Al-hagla, 2010: 235). The 'environmental past' of a person (a past consisting of places, spaces and their properties), is at the core of his physical environmental-related cognition, which has served instrumentally in the satisfaction of his biological, psychological, social, and cultural needs (Proshansky et al., 1983: 59).

The need for place identity was stressed by Relph (1976) in his pioneer book *Place and Placelessness* (Oktay, 2002: 261). Other concepts such as place-attachment (Altman & Low, 1992), topophilia (Tuan, 1974), insideness (Rowles, 1983), place-identity (Proshansky, Fabian & Kaminoff, 1983; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996), sense of place/rootedness (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1980; cited in: Chow, 2008: 363),

emotional bonds, affiliation, behavioral commitment, satisfaction and belonging (Chow, 2008: 363) all represent categories which constitute the message of this paper. Two vital terms pertaining to place identity is *genius loci* and the power of place which were discussed by Shultz (1987) and reflected belief in a place with an identity of its own (Salah Ouf, 2010: 78). In the eighteenth century this phrase was usually translated into 'genius of place' and Jackson (1994) traced the concept of 'sense of place' as "an awkward and ambiguous translation" of this Latin term (Galway, 2006: 398).

Several authors have stated that place-attachment and place-identity are synonyms (e.g. Brown & Werner, 1985) or practically have used attachment in term of identity (Stedman, 2002; cited in: Chow, 2008: 363). Moore (2007) believes that place attachment focuses on evaluation of place but place-identity's focus is on participation of place in self-identity.

Proshansky (1983) defines place-identity as an individual's strong emotional attachment to a particular place. Lalli (1992), Puddi-foot (1995), Teigger-Ross et al. (1996) argue that place identity is an integrating concept under which attachment is subsumed while Altman and Low (1992) perceive place-identity is a form of place attachment. Hey (1998) considered sense of place as a super-ordered reality whereas Kyle et al. (2005) categorize place attachment as a multidimensional construct that incorporates factors like identity, place dependence and social bonds. Place attachment is indeed a multifaceted and complex phenomenon that incorporates several aspects of people– place bonding, including behavior, affect and cognition which are central to the concept (Chow, 2008: 363).

With regard to identity Lynch (1981) conceives it as the extent to which a person can recognize or recall a place as being distinct from other places (Oktay, 2002: 261). Based on his collective and personal experiences from past and present every person has a mental image. If this image accommodates with the reality, identification occurs. This identification makes the phenomenon familiar and reduces therefore the stresses in confronting it. Attachment and rootedness follow, and memories and associations happen and grow. These all are the products of identification (Ghasemi, 2005: 43). By extension, Gillis (1994) proposes that national identity involves a widely shared memory of a common past for people who will never see or talk to one another in flesh (Gospodini, 2002: 25).

## Data and Method

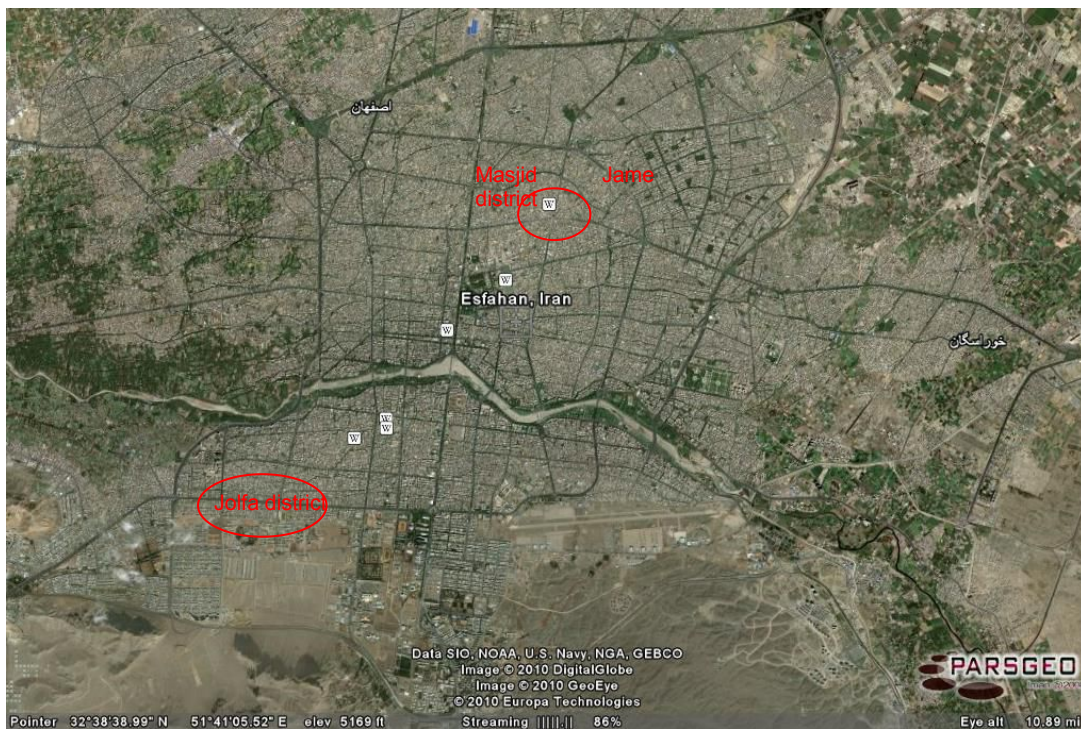
### *Study area*

Isfahan is a city with a long history and several historical texts. People of different religions have been living in old Isfahan of the Safavid period. These are Armenian Christians in the south-west (Jolfa region), Zoroastrians in the south-east, Muslims in the north-west, and Jews in the north-east. At present some of these historical sites are still highly valued while others are in poor condition. For the purpose of this study which is to examine if there are correlations between the conservation and preservation of historical sites and the people's bonds and sense of belonging to them (Fig.1) two different historical sites, Jolfa and Masjid Jame were selected.

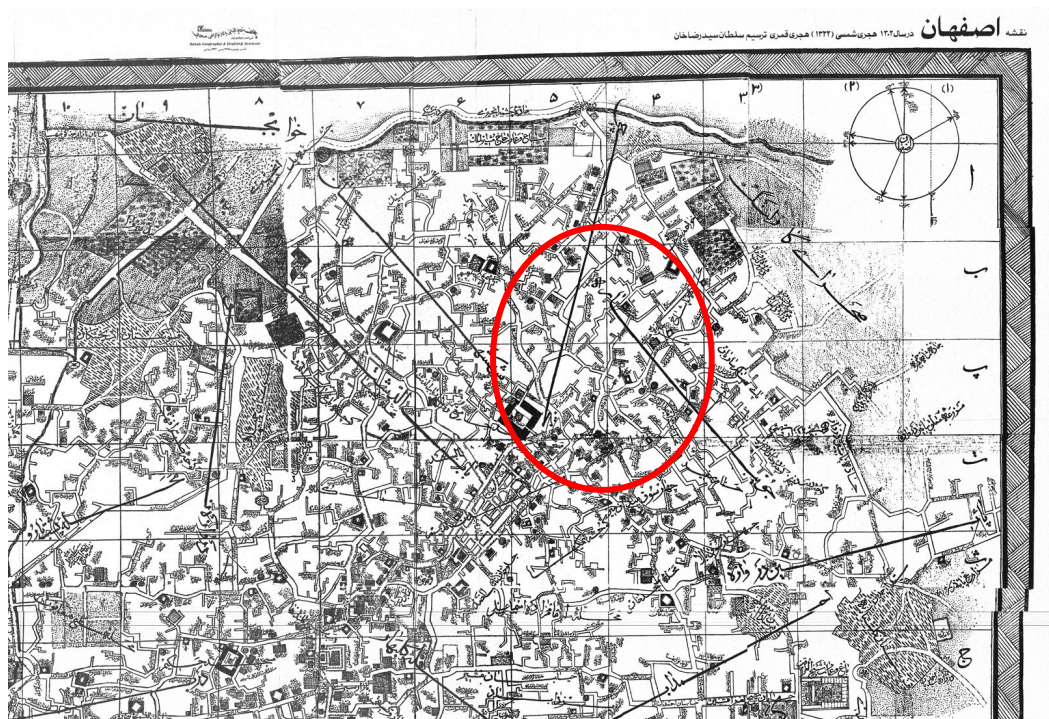
During the reign of Shah Abbas in the Safavid period, Armenians had resided in Jolfa and named it as such. Jolfa as used in this study comprises quarters such as the Khaghani, big square, Chahar sooq, Tabriziha, and Sangtarashha. Although originally the great church and the Armenians society were the owners of many parcels of land in this region, Armenians and Muslims both live in today's Jolfa, pushing the value of land in this region as among the most expensive in Isfahan (Fig. 6,7,8).

During the Saljooghi period which preceded the Safavid period, Masjid Jame (Fig. 2) was the most important part of the city which features the old Bazar of Isfahan and the iconic Main Masjid - one of the oldest in Iran dating from the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Masjid Jame as used in this study consists of the historical sites of Shahshahan, Joobare (in which Jews reside) and Darbe Emam. This area has since become a densely populated slum where many of its original residents have gone away and replaced by migrants from other cities and by Asian refugees (Fig.3,4,5). This area has among the lowest land value in Isfahan. Both Jolfa and Masjid Jame have a linear business centre along the sides of their main streets.





**Fig. 1.** *Isfahan city map and location of two mentioned sites*



**Fig. 2.** *Old map of Masjed district (Seyed Reza Khan map-1940)*



**Fig.3.** *A view of behind Masjid Jame building*



**Fig.4.** *A view of an urban space in the site (Masjid Jame district)*





**Fig.5.** *Some destroyed places by the lanes (Masjid Jame district)*



**Fig.6.** *One of the urban spaces of Jolfa district*



**Fig.7.** *One of Jolfa avenues*



**Fig.8.** *One of Jolfa Lanes*

### *Field observations*

Direct field observations formed the first phase of this study. The key element of this qualitative method was to establish the extent to which spaces within the two historical sites were so valued by their residents that they would want to preserve and conserve them. This phase had produced contrasting experiences. Jolfa appeared to be in a better condition than Masjid Jame; the area was cleaner, the residents were more

friendly and sympathetic with each other, and the old buildings felt like an integral part of site not an unwanted segment waiting to be removed. By contrast, people in the Masjid Jame area seemed to be negative about their environment with the single exception of the Masjid which was perceived by the local public as most valuable and worthy of preservation. There was ambivalence about the locals' appreciation of the site. Many of them appeared satisfied or contented with the conditions of the place, but when asked "If you had a better chance, would you leave this place?" some of them answered, "Yes, why not?". Even for some who would not leave the place the reason given was, "We stay here although condition is not good because where else can we live at?".

### *Field survey*

Field surveys by means of distributed questionnaires to a sampled population formed the second phase of this study. Questionnaires were locally distributed to 100 randomly selected residents, salesmen, and shopkeepers in Masjid Jame and another 100 in Jolfa. The questionnaire consisted of six questions designed to gauge respondents' state of place attachment. A six-point Lickert item was used to represent the relative degree of respondents' place attachment : 5= extremely attached, 4= highly attached, 3= moderately attached, 2= less attached, 1= least attached, and 0=not attached at all. Altogether six questions were posed to the respondents to obtain data pertaining to their place attachment (Table 1).

**Table 1. Questions posed in the questionnaire**

No.	Question	Objective
1.	How much do you like your neighborhood?	To probe into the locals' interest in the site.
2.	In your opinion, how much does your neighborhood satisfy what you want ?	To gauge the locals' rate of accommodation of the gap between their mental image of the site and its reality.
3.	What extent of your interest of the site is due to the length of the time you had been there?	To estimate the role of time in shaping and moulding the locals' place attachment.
4.	How much do you know about the entire district?	To gauge the locals' acquaintance or familiarity with all parts of the historical site.
5.	How much does this neighborhood form a reference, recognition or part of your identity?	To explore the degree of the locals' self - identification with the place.
6.	What extent of the district pleasance is due to your memories and mental association?	To gauge the role of the locals' memories and associations in shaping their sense of pleasure of the place.

## **Findings**

### *Place Interest*

A statistically significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ) between the rate of place interest and place attachment was found in this survey. The mean value of scores in Jolfa was 4.46 (between extreme and high) while in Masjid Jame the respective figure was 3.45 (between moderate and high). In Masjid Jame, 8.6 % of people said that they have no sense of attachment or belonging to their neighborhood and 5.7% of them have the least sense of connectedness with the site. For the majority (34%) of the locals the sense of place attachment as measured in terms of place interest was average. In comparison with Jolfa, only 13.3% of the residents exhibited moderate place interest while the rest (86.7%) were in the extremely high and high categories (Table 2).



**Table 2. Scores for Place Interest**

Lickert items	Scores (%) for Place Interest	
	Masjed Jame	Jolfa
0	8.6	0.0
1	0.0	0.0
2	5.7	0.0
3	34.3	13.3
4	20.0	26.7
5	31.4	60.0
No answer	0.0	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0
Mean	3.4571	4.4667

*Accommodation between place image and reality*

The locals were asked about how best did the reality of the historical place fit their mental imagination of an ideal neighborhood. In reply, Masjid Jame gave a mean of 2.6 which was between “low” and “moderate”. The Jolfa mean was 3.96 depicting a “high” rating. In Masjid Jame a total of 45.7% of local residents and 68.6% of local businessmen registered a “moderate” to “low” score. In contrast in 70% of the locals in Jolfa revealed an “extremely high” and “high” coincidence (Table 3).

**Table 3. Scores for Accommodation between place image and reality**

Lickert items	Scores (%) for Accommodation between place image and reality	
	Masjed Jame	Jolfa
0	11.4	0.0
1	11.4	0.0
2	22.9	3.3
3	22.9	26.7
4	22.9	40.0
5	8.6	30.0
No answer	0.0	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0
Mean	2.6000	3.9667

*Time factor in place attachment*

The mean for the length of time influencing the locals’ attachment to historical sites was 3.48 for Masjid Jame and 3.96 for Jolfa both signifying a moderate to high score. Nevertheless, 73.4% of Jolfa’s residents registered “high” and “extremely high” scores (Table 4).

**Table 4. Scores for Time factor in place attachment**

Lickert items	Scores (%) for Time factor in place attachment	
	Masjed Jame	Jolfa
0	2.9	0.0
1	2.9	0.0
2	20.0	13.3
3	17.1	13.3
4	31.4	36.7
5	25.7	36.7
No answer	0.0	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0
Mean	3.4857	3.9667

### *Place acquaintance*

The familiarity of locals with both historical sites was high as signified by the mean score of 4.03. Approximately 40% of residents in each site knew the district thoroughly (Table 5).

**Table 5. Scores for Place acquaintance**

Lickert items	Scores (%) for Place acquaintance	
	Masjed Jame	Jolfa
0	2.9	0.0
1	2.9	0.0
2	2.9	13.3
3	14.3	26.7
4	34.3	30.0
5	42.9	30.0
No answer	0.0	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0
Mean	4.0286	4.0333

### *Place identification*

Here the question posed was intended to gauge the extent to which the historical site formed an integral part of the residents' self-identity through their pride in being its residents. The mean of answers in Masjid Jame was 3.5 with 37.1% and 62.9% of the respondents giving 'moderate' to 'low' and 'high to 'extremely high' ratings. In Jolfa the figures were 3.9, 96.7% and 70% respectively. Although the ratings in Jolfa were significantly high the difference was not too great from those of Masjid Jame (Table 6).

**Table 6. Scores for Place identification**

Lickert items	Scores (%) for Place identification	
	Masjed Jame	Jolfa
0	11.4	0.0
1	0.0	3.3
2	2.9	0.0
3	22.9	26.7
4	34.3	40.0
5	28.6	30.0
No answer	0.0	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0
Mean	3.5429	3.9333

### *Memories and associations*

As an important point in forming place attachment the locals were asked about the relationship of their memories and associations with place desirability. In Jolfa, 80% of the locals believed that the dependence of the two elements was 'high' and 'extremely high' while in Masjid Jame it was 51.4% (Table 7).

**Table 7. Scores for Place memories and associations**

Lickert items	Scores (%) for Place memories and associations	
	Masjed Jame	Jolfa
0	2.9	3.3
1	2.9	3.3
2	17.1	0.0
3	25.7	13.4
4	37.1	60.0
5	14.3	20.0
No answer	0.0	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0
Mean	3.3429	3.9333

The results of the study showed that people in the Jolfa district were in a better condition and enjoyed several vital urban spaces than the locals in Masjid Jame. The Jolfa residents more satisfied with their urban spaces in constructing their place-attachment; they were more interested in the site and were more able to reconcile the gap between their image of a good neighborhood and its reality. They had a long term perspective of their residence and thus were able to forge a more effective sense of belonging to the place. Their neighborhood had become a part of their identity and they had many memories which helped solidifying their place attachment. By the Jolfa illustration it can be claimed that there was a positive correlation between place-identity and place-attachment and the physical condition of the Isfahan historical sites: the more place-attachments formed, the better condition it would have.

The situation was rather different for the Masjid Jame district where physical conditions and collective image of the residents appeared to reveal the relative devaluation of the district as an ideal place to live in. Only 8.6% and 22.6% of the residents here valued the place 'extremely highly' and 'highly' respectively and as manifested by the deteriorating physical conditions of the place.



## Conclusion

The overall objective of this study was to examine the relationship between preserving urban historical texts (sites) and locals' place attachment using a psychometric measure as well as participant observation of the two comparative sites. The results showed that although there was a significant positive relationship between place-identity (represented by place attachment and place condition) in the two historical sites some other factors also influence the relationships such as aesthetic perception, ownership, economic situations, and management issues. Future studies may do well to focus on the role of these other factors, in particular, residents' aesthetic sensitivity and site aesthetic value.

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